

Call for Papers

Panel

‘Just a Step to the Right’? Assessing the Republican Party in the polarized party system

As Part of the Section:

Rigging the System – Righting the System: Dimensions of a constitutional, political and societal crisis in the United States

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Panel Chair

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The polarization of American politics in general and the party system in particular has been saliently on display for some time now (Gerring, 1998; Hacker & Pierson, 2005; McCarty, Poole, Rosenthal, 2006; Abramowitz, 2010; Mann & Ornstein, 2012; Boatright, 2013; Klein, 2020). Yet, the exceptionally contentious period of the Trump Administration and the first year since his defeat at the ballot box have brought forth ever more drastic examples of hyper-partisanship that is no longer rooted in ideological or philosophical differences. The Trump 2015 onslaught on the GOP has transformed the party away from the “principled conservatism” inherited from Reagan (Stevens, 2020) and toward an unstable mix of populisms borrowing from the Left (protectionism, preservation of social security) and the Right (anti-immigration stance, Wall at the southern border, deregulation, tax cuts etc.). After the 2018 midterms, this evolution has sprawled and branched out to the party in Congress and in the States, so much so that the ideological nature of the party is now blurred (as illustrated by the lack of an official party platform for the 2020 presidential contest) and that numerous Trump-like figures have emerged at all levels. That’s why numerous controversial events and developments linked with Republican Party officeholders as well as supporters and, more or less, sympathizing groups have shaken the political establishment: US Congress members such as Adam Kinzinger have decided not to seek re-election, while even a long-time staunch Republican, Liz Cheney, has been removed from party leadership positions for supporting investigations into the Jan. 6 2021 ‘Capitol riots’; Marjorie Taylor Greene publicly lodges increasingly conspiratorial critiques and Paul Gosar essentially unveiled threats of violence against a fellow Democrat House Representative. Symbolic figures like Kyle Rittenhouse, recently acquitted for the shooting of three people (two fatally) at a protest, have become rising stars for conservative groups and media and Republican-led State governments diverge from, and in many cases even prohibit the implementation of, federal public-health measures in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several members of Congress even seem to have been involved in a coup attempt in the context of the certification of the 2020 election results. Against this backdrop, this panel seeks to bring together scholars to assess the development of the party system, partisan socio-political contestation, and the Republican Party in all of its facets: “in the electorate”, “in the government”, and “as an organization” to take up V.O. Key’s traditional typology (1964).

This panel invites contributions addressing a variety of issues and taking different social-science perspectives. Of particular concern is the assessment of the Republican Party in the context of the seemingly continued growing divisiveness of US politics and society, with an emphasis on:

- Organization: Has the party itself actually radicalized further, and if so, in context/program or rather in rhetoric/communication aspects, both or none? What’s the part played by party leaders (the “Establishment” so vilified by Trump) – in either House of Congress and/or in State governments? How about changes in the way the party performs a certain number of traditional partisan functions, like representation, coalition-building and policy-demands? More generally, the nature of American parties may be a topic worth of consideration: from mass parties (Duverger, 1955) to “party cartels” (Mair & Katz, 1995), including the “hollowing out” of party structures (Mair, 2013; Scholzman & Rosenfeld, 2019), political science has come up with various labels to account for party changes and the US Republican Party is part and parcel of these transnational trends.
- Mobilization: What’s the part played by new technological means, especially online, to mobilize voters and to raise funds? What’s the relation between various social movements and party structures? Has the tension between local grassroots’ efforts and the party leadership subsided? Or has the Trump presidency led to a widening of the gap? What are the outreach efforts toward ethnic communities in the context of a “trumpization” of the party? Is the 2012 partisan “post-mortem” still relevant?
- Nomination: the extent to which primary elections have become the main arena for electoral competition in a wide number of districts and/or States. Many incumbents run the risk of being “primaried out” (Boatright, 2014) in a context of low electoral turnout.
- Program: is it still possible to identify an ideological coherence animating the Republican Party beyond a mere gathering of hatred and resentments? President Biden recently called out Republicans by publicly asking what they stand for, a stance reminiscent of Obama’s “party of No”. To what extent is there a programmatic ambition in today’s Republican Party? Has the conservative revolution of the past fifty years exhausted its course? Are Republicans still “creators of the future” as Reagan said back in 1985?
- Funding: Election funding and the rise of a deregulated political market in which wealthy networks of donors and/or grassroots’ efforts by voters are the main characteristics, both paving the way for the rise of polarization
- More generally, identified economic and social changes that may have more profound and lasting implications for the stability of the party system and of government are welcome in this panel

In addition to different (sub)disciplinary approaches, papers may also consider trends in other political systems from a comparative perspective.

Paper proposals of max. 500 words should be submitted to the panel chair by February 12, 2022.